

# From our Churches

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*Date: July 2009*

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## Book Review

### *Generous Orthodoxy, by Brian D. McLaren*

McLaren is an ex-English teacher who came to theological writing through the “backdoor”. He does not claim to be a theologian. He is a church planter and pastor in the United States and a key member in the Emerging or Emergent Church movement. McLaren has experienced a variety of church traditions, growing up in the Fundamental-Evangelical tradition but then seeking other experiences in Christianity.

This book came recommended by Raul Enns Bogoya from the CMU Bookstore. I was looking for a book that could somehow bridge the gap between the Evangelical “culture” of the Protestant church here in Burkina Faso and my own traditions-based Anabaptist upbringing. I was also feeling like I was lacking a part of church history that explained in a simple, clear way what some of the other Christian denominations are about, such as Calvinism, Pentecostalism, Fundamentalism, Anglicism, Methodism, etc. This book promised to do that.

McLaren says that the book is for the following people: a) those who are not Christian and wondering why anyone would want to be; b) those you are not yet Christian but thinking of becoming one; c) those who are already Christian but who are struggling, questioning and looking for reasons to stay in; d) those who have left the Christian community but whose hearts are still there; e) those who are curious about what it means to be postmodern and missional; f) those who are new to the Christian way, and trying to learn the lay of the land; g) those who are looking for dirt on people other than Evangelicals in order to write a hostile review.

I would add that the book is for those looking for hope in a church that seems despised and irrelevant in the post-modern world. The book is for anybody looking for a breath of fresh-air and some easy yet provocative reading on the future of the church, especially in North America.

The book begins by going through the experiences of the author in the Christian tradition. The author explains his journey of faith as a young person experiencing Jesus in a variety of settings. He describes “7 Jesuses” that he has known and explains both his appreciation for and frustration of seeing Jesus in this way. His experience is like a progression critiquing Christianity along the way and asking himself (as in the title of another one of his books with Tony Campolo), “Have we missed the point?” McLaren goes on to flesh out what a more “generously orthodox” view of Jesus and of God might look like, even asking a very interesting question, “Would Jesus be a Christian?”

Part II of the book, the meat of the book, goes through many different Christian traditions and denominations in an attempt to pull out what is worthwhile from each in order to add it to our

“Generous Orthodoxy”. Orthodoxy means “right thinking or writing”, so McLaren’s goal is to critique and appreciate various traditions in order that the church “emerges” with something based on the Bible AND on tradition so that the church may meet the needs of people seeking God in the post-modern, “post-liberal”, “post-evangelical” world. Thus, the subtitle of the book outlines Part II: *Why I am a missional + evangelical + post/protestant + liberal/conservative + mystic/poetic + biblical + charismatic/contemplative + fundamentalist/calvinist + anabaptist/anglican + methodist + catholic + green + incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished Christian*. Each of these elements makes up its own chapter of the book.

This book helped me learn a lot about other traditions with which I was not familiar. More than that, though, it helped me see the good in the traditions and pull out this good to incorporate it into my own experience. McLaren also spares no words in critiquing some of the traditions. He is especially hard on his own fundamentalist/evangelical background.

Probably the most important impact this book has on a person is that it provides hope for the future of the church. In a recent Canadian Mennonite article on the Emergent Church, it is stated that in the history of Christianity, generally every 500 years there is some kind of “Reformation-like” event. It seems like whereas many in post-modern society find the Evangelical churches irrelevant, an “Emerging” Church that emerges out of the traditions of the past taking-on what is useful and discarding what is no longer useful provides the opportunity for people who otherwise would not step foot in a church to experience Christ in a relevant way. The Emerging Church isn’t about right doctrine or orthodoxy, but about welcoming people to participate in Christ’s life as embodied in the body of Christ – i.e. the church/community. The Emerging Church is less about institutions and more about becoming welcoming and inviting people into the Kingdom.

McLaren is quick to point out that this is not a church of pluralistic relativism. Rather, it is a church above and beyond both absolutism and pluralistic relativism.

The book helped me to see the good in the Evangelical tradition, of which I am often highly critical. At the same time, the book pointed out the limits of this tradition inviting me to use the passion and energy and confidence of Evangelicals in our Kingdom work, but leaving out some of the less relevant aspects of Evangelicalism, such as the absolutist parts.

This book is not a definitive word on the traditions it talks about. McLaren does not try to be an expert on any of the traditions he experienced. This is not a scholarly document, but a profound, provocative, and prophetic word about the future direction of the church. Those looking for historical and ideological accuracy will not find it here. The chapter on Anabaptism does not do it justice. This reveals, I think, how much McLaren was forced to leave out when talking about each tradition. In order to cover so many different materials, McLaren was forced to reduce his chapters to scratches on the surface. Still, such an overview of these traditions was extremely useful for me.

This book would best be suited for a Western-based (NA or European) ministry. It is a book about engaging the post-modern world. I don’t find the Burkina church, for instance, in this world yet. Still, it was refreshing to see that there is hope beyond the dichotomies of liberal/conservative, catholic/protestant, Evangelical/(whatever the opposite would be) especially as I live in a context that prefers to see things black and white (pardon the metaphor).

I think that explaining the church and the role of Jesus in the way McLaren does could be an open door for many of those in North America who have given up any hope of one day being part of the church, or those who shut themselves off whenever talk of “Christian” comes up. **This book is a must-read for us all – probably within my top 5 books that I’ve read on our understanding of Christ and the Church. It is unlike anything I had ever read before.**